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Fire and Ice: John Muir's Impressions of Mono Lake.

John Muir

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THE MONO LAKE NEWSLETTER

Spring 1985

Vol. 7, No. 4



CARL
DENNIS
BUELL

Rush Creek Showdown
Stretching the Colorado River
Mono Lake Workshops

THE MONO LAKE NEWSLETTER

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ON THE COVER: Rush Creek, Mono's largest tributary stream. For the past three years, it has been watering the lake and nurturing thousands of trout. But now DWP wants the water, and only a temporary restraining order is staying its hand and keeping the stream alive. A court battle looms ahead.

ABOUT OUR COVER ARTIST: Carl Dennis Buell is a professional scientific and commercial illustrator who is donating his artistic talents to improve our publications (Studio 306, 1045 Sansome St., San Francisco, CA 94111; (415) 989-4582).

It is impossible to care for each other more or differently than we care for the earth.

...Wendell Barry

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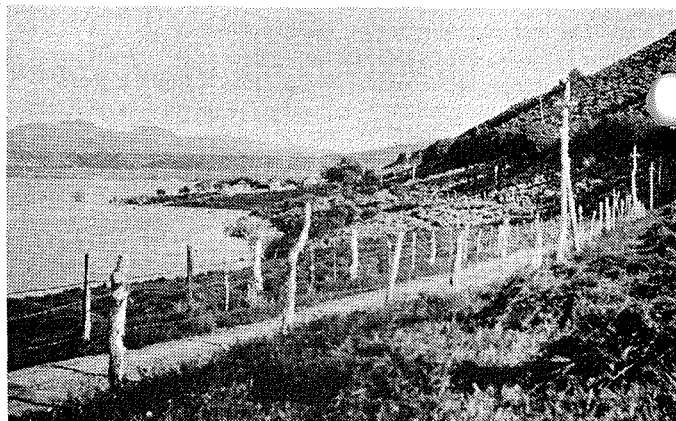
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Margaret Calhoun is equally riveting, but more intimate. Raised on a farm near Mono Lake's north shore, she describes the tough but wholesome life of the hardscrabble farmer. Unlike many local histories that focus on sensational events, Calhoun vividly conveys the everyday life of pioneer settlers in a style that is personal and moving. Her book is sprinkled with simple, charming poetry, and even includes recipes for sagebrush tea and hog's head cheese. First published in 1968 and long out of print, it is one of the best local histories ever written.

Those were the days when kids inflated hogs' bladders for use as balloons and punching bags, strips of peppered bacon were placed on the throat to draw out soreness, and wheat was raised, thrashed and ground by hand. There were wild, week-long poker games, horse thefts, shoot-outs, floods and avalanches. In winter, men braved blizzards to deliver mail and repair telephone lines. Bodie—now a ghost town—was the "big city" where settlers rode for a whole day to deliver vegetables and hay, visit the doctor or purchase goods from San Francisco.

It's amazing how late conveniences came to the area. For instance, Mono's settlers remained virtually isolated by winter storms until highway improvements and the local invention of the modern snowplow in the 1930s.

Both books give Mono's place names special meaning. Simon's Spring, Lee Vining, Deadman Summit, Paoha Island,



The west shore of Mono Lake circa 1920 before the highway was paved. From Man from Mono.

Dechambeau Ranch, Goat Ranch and many other localities become associated with the remarkable tales of people who lived and died there.

Both "Man From Mono" and "Pioneers of the Mono Basin" are available by mail from the Mono Lake Committee, P.O. Box 119, Lee Vining, CA 93541. Please add \$2.50 shipping (California residents add 6 percent sales tax).

FIRE AND ICE: John Muir's Impressions of Mono Lake

In August 1869, John Muir first set foot in the Mono Basin. In "My First Summer in the Sierra Nevada," he describes "a country of wonderful contrasts. Hot deserts bounded by snow-laden mountains, cinders and ashes scattered on glacier-polished pavements, frost and fire working together in the making of beauty." Twenty-eight years later, in 1896, Muir wrote about Mono again. The following is excerpted from his essay, "The Passes of the High Sierra," which appeared in a now obscure book, "Picturesque California."

While not his best writing, Muir's account is of substantial historical interest. The "rich, oily windrows" of brine fly larvae disappeared in the 1950s, probably due to increasing salinity. Sage grouse and pronghorn antelope are now exceedingly scarce, and bighorn sheep have vanished entirely. Most of the "fine, dashing streams" have been diverted and drained, and the tangles of "aspens and berry bushes" have withered and died.

I found the so-called Mono Desert in a high state of natural cultivation with the wild rose, the delicate pink-flowered abronia and innumerable erigerons, gillias, phloxes, poppies and bush-compositae growing not only along stream banks, but out in the hot sand and ashes in openings among the sagebrush, and even in the craters of the highest volcanoes, cheering the gray wilderness

with their rosy bloom, and literally giving beauty for ashes.

Beyond the moraines the trail turns to the left toward Mono Lake, now in sight around the spurs of the mountains, and touches its western shore at a distance from the foot of the pass of about six miles. Skirting the lake, you make your way over low bluffs and moraine piles, and through many a tangle of snow-crinkled aspens and berry bushes, growing on the banks of fine, dashing streams that come from the snows of the summits.

Here are the favorite camping grounds of the Indians, littered with piles of pine-burrs from which the seeds have been beaten. Many of their fragile willow huts are broken and abandoned; others arch airily over family groups that are seen lying at ease, pictures of thoughtless contentment, their black shocks of hair perchance bedecked with red castileias, and their bent, bulky stomachs filled with no white man knows what.

Some of these mountain streams pouring into the lake have deep and swift currents at the fording places, and their channels are so roughly paved with boulders that crossing them at the time of high water is rather dangerous.

The lake water is as clear as the snow-streams that feed it, but intensely acrid and nauseating from the excessive quantities of salts accumulated by evaporation beneath a burning sun. Of course no fish can live in it,

but large flocks of geese, ducks and swans come from beyond the mountains at certain seasons, and gulls also in great numbers, to breed in a group of volcanic islands that rise near the center of the lake, thus making the dead, bitter sea lively and cheerful while they stay.

The eggs of the gulls used to be gathered for food by the Indians, who floated to the islands on rafts made of willows. But since a great storm on the lake a few years ago overtook them on their way back from the islands, they have not ventured from the shore. Their rafts were broken up and many were drowned. This disaster, together with certain superstitious fears concerning evil spirits supposed to dwell in the lake and rule its waves, make them content with the safer and far more important products of the shores, chief of which is the wormy larvae of a small fly that breeds in the slimy froth in the shallows.

When the worms are ripe, and the waves have collected them and driven them up on the beach in rich oily windrows, old and young make haste to the curious harvest, and gather the living grain in baskets and buckets of every description. After being washed and dried in the sun it is stored for winter. Raw or cooked, it is regarded as a fine luxury, and delicious dressing for other kinds of food.

Forbidding as this gray, ashy wilderness is to the dweller in green fields, to the red man it is a paradise full of all the good things of life. A Yosemite Indian with whom I was acquainted went over the mountains to Mono every year on a pleasure trip. When I asked what would induce him to go to so poor a country when, as a hotel servant, he enjoyed all the white man's good things in abundance, he replied that Mono had better things to eat than anything to be found in the hotel—plenty deer, plenty wild sheep, plenty antelope, plenty worm, plenty berry, plenty sagehen, plenty rabbit—drawing a picture of royal abundance that from his point of view surpassed everything else the world had to offer.

A sail on the lake develops many a fine picture—the natives along the curving shores seen against so grand a mountain background; water birds stirring the glassy surface into white dancing spangles; the islands, black, pink and gray, rising into a cloud of white wings of gulls; volcanoes dotting the hazy plain; and grandest of all and overshadowing all, the mighty barrier wall of the Sierra, heaving into the sky from the water's edge, and stretching away to north and south with its marvelous wealth of peaks, crests and deep-cutting notches keenly defined, or fading away in the soft purple distance; cumulus clouds swelling over all in huge mountain bosses of pearl, building a mountain range of cloud upon a range of rock, the one as firmly sculptured, and as grand and showy and substantial as the other.

The magnificent cluster of volcanoes to the south of the lake may easily be visited from the foot of Bloody Canyon, the distance being only about six miles. The highest of the group rises about 2,700 feet above the lake. They are all post-glacial in age, having been erupted from what was once the bottom of the south end of the lake through stratified glacial drift. During their numerous periods of activity they have scattered showers of ashes and cinders over all the adjacent plains and mountains.

Nowhere within the bounds of our wonder-filled land are the antagonistic forces of fire and ice brought more closely and contrastingly together. So striking are the volcanic phenomena, we seem to be among the very hearths and firesides of nature. Then turning to the mountains, while standing in drifting ashes, we behold huge moraines issuing from the cool jaws of the great canyons, marking the pathways of glaciers that crawled down the mountain sides laden with debris and pushed their frozen floods into the deep water of the lake in thundering icebergs, as they are now descending into the inland waters of Alaska, not a single Arctic character being wanting where now the traveler is blinded in a glare of tropical light.

John Muir with Paiutes near Mono Lake. The photograph was taken circa 1900 by anthropologist C. Hart Merriam.



Photo courtesy of Bancroft Library